Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution

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Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism

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In their mountainous corner of Syria, the Alawis claim to represent the furthest extension of Twelver Shi'ism. The Alawis number perhaps a million persons—about 12 percent of Syria's population—and are concentrated in the northwestern region around Latakia and Tartus. This religious minority has provided Syria's rulers for nearly two decades: Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad, in power since 1970, as well as Syria's leading military and security chiefs, are of Alawi origin. Once poor peasants, they beat their ploughshares into swords, first becoming military officers, then using the instruments of war to seize the state. The role of Alawi communal solidarity has been difficult to define, and tribal affiliation, kinship, and ideology also explain the composition of Syria's ruling elite. But when all is said and done, the fact remains that power in Syria is closely held by Alawis.[1]

This domination has bred deep resentment among many of Syria's Sunni Muslims, who constitute 70 percent of the country's population. For at the forefront of Syria's modern struggle for independence were the Sunni Muslims who populated the cities of Syria's heartland. They enjoyed a privileged standing under Sunni Ottoman rule; they, along with Syrian Christian intellectuals, developed the guiding principles of Arab nationalism; they resisted the French; and they stepped into positions of authority with the departure of the French. Syria was their patrimony, and the subsequent rise of the Alawis seemed to many of them a usurpation. True, Sunni Arab nationalists had put national solidarity above religious allegiance and admitted the Alawis as fellow Arabs. But there were many Sunnis who still identified their nationalist aspirations with their Islam and confused Syrian independence with the rule of their own community. Alawi ascendence left them disillusioned, betrayed by the ideology of Arabism which they themselves had concocted.[2]

Some embittered Sunnis reformulated their loyalties in explicitly Muslim terms and now maintain that the creed of the Alawis falls completely outside the confines of Islam. For them, the rule of an Alawi is the rule of a disbeliever, and it was this conviction that they carried with them in their futile insurrection of February 1982. The Alawis, in turn, proclaim themselves to be Twelver Shi'i Muslims. This is at once an interesting and problematic claim, with a tangled history; it cannot be lightly dismissed or unthinkingly accepted. It raises essential questions about religious authority and orthodoxy in contemporary Twelver Shi'ism. And it is complicated by the fact that Syria enjoys the closest and fullest relationship with revolutionary Iran of any state. The old controversy over the origins of the Alawis has been forgotten, and the contemporary Alawi enigma is this: By whose authority, and in whose eyes, are the Alawis counted as Twelver Shi'is?

The Alawis are heirs to a distinctive religious tradition, which is at the root of their dilemma in modern Syria. Beginning in the nineteenth century, some of the esoteric texts of the Alawis were acquired by scholars and published, and these still provide most of what is known about Alawi doctrine. The picture that emerged from these documents was of a highly eclectic creed, embracing elements of uncertain origin. Some of its features were indisputably Shi'i, and included the veneration of Ali and the Twelve Imams. But in the instance of Ali, this veneration carried over into actual deification, so that Ali was represented as an incarnation of God. Muhammad was his visible veil and prophet, and Muhammad's companion, Salman al-Farisi, his proselytizer. The three formed a divine triad, but the deification of Ali represented the touchstone of Alawi belief. Astral gnosticism, and a doctrine of transmigration of souls, also figured in Alawi cosmology. These religious truths were guarded by a caste of religious shaykhs (*rijal al-din*); the mass of uninitiated Alawis knew only the exoteric features of their faith. An important visible sign of Alawi esoterism was the absence of mosques from Alawi regions: Prayer was not regarded as a general religious obligation since religious truth was the preserve of the religious shaykhs and those few Alawis initiated by them into the mysteries of the doctrine. Such a faith was best practiced in a remote and inaccessible place, and it was indeed in such rugged surroundings that the Alawis found refuge. For, as might be expected, Sunni heresiographers excoriated Alawi beliefs and viewed the Alawis as disbelievers (*kuffar*) and idolators (*mushrikun*). Twelver Shi'i heresiographers were only slightly less vituperative and regarded the Alawis as *ghulat*, "those who exceed" all bounds in their deificiation of Ali. The Alawis, in turn, held Twelver Shi'is to be *muqassira*, "those who fall short" of fathoming Ali's divinity.[3]

From the late nineteenth century, the Alawis were subjected to growing pressure to shed their traditional doctrines and reform their faith. The Ottomans had a clear motive for pressing the Alawis to abandon their ways. Alawi doctrine attracted much interest among French missionaries and orientalists, some of whom were convinced that the Alawis were lost Christians. The Ottomans drew political conclusions, and feared a French bid to extend France's religious protectorate northward from Lebanon to the mountains overlooking Tartus and Latakia. At the same time, the Alawis themselves could not but feel the effects of the Muslim revival that swept through Syria in the second half of the nineteenth century and the popular Muslim backlash against the Tanzimat. These two pressures combined to produce a reformist drive among a handful of Alawi shaykhs, who enjoyed the encouragement of the Ottoman authorities. The result was some government-financed construction of mosques, which were built almost as talismans to ward off the foreign eye. But since the Ottoman purpose was to assimilate the Alawis, the formula of prayer in these first mosques was Sunni Hanafi, in accord with the predominant rite in the Empire. The authorities had no reason to encourage the few reformist Alawi shaykhs to lead their coreligionists in any other direction.

All this produced few lasting effects. The influence of this early reformism was very limited, and most of the Alawi religious shaykhs would have nothing to do with it. The rapid turnover of Ottoman governors also meant that pressure upon the Alawis was not maintained. Since these governors could extract very few taxes from the Alawis, it seemed unsound fiscal policy to spend revenues on them. In the twilight years of the Ottoman Empire, the Alawis remained essentially as they had been for centuries, divided and unassimilated, with their esoteric doctrines still intact. Few Alawis had ever crossed the portal of a mosque.[4]

When the Ottoman Empire fell, the French claimed Syria as their share, and the Alawis found their new rulers eager to protect and patronize them. French policy was generally one of encouraging Alawi separatism, of setting Alawis against the Sunni nationalists who agitated for Syrian independence and unity. From 1922 to 1936, the Alawis even had a separate state of their own, under French mandate. But within their state, the Alawis were still the economic and social inferiors of Sunnis, and these relationships could not be undone by simple administrative decree. There was, however, one form of dependence which had to be broken, if the Alawis were to feel themselves equal to Sunnis. Ottoman authorities had imposed Sunni Hanafi law wherever their reach extended, a law administered by Sunni courts. Alawi custom had prevailed in Alawi civil matters, in which the Ottomans had no desire to intervene,

but this custom had no legal standing. In the new order, a pressing need arose to give the Alawis recognized communal status, courts, and judges. Now this was a daunting task, for Alawi custom was too dependent upon traditional social authority to be reduced to codified principles and applied in the courts.

A solution was found in 1922, by importing the law and some of the judges. In that year, the French authorized the establishment of separate religious courts for the Alawis (*mahakim shar'iyya alawiyya*), and it was decided that they would rule in accordance with the Twelver Shi'i school of law.[5] This school was as remote from Alawi custom as any other. Its principal advantage lay in the obvious fact that it removed Alawi affairs to separate but equal courts and placed Alawis squarely outside the jurisdiction of their Sunni neighbors and overlords. But since there were no Alawis sufficiently expert in Twelver Shi'i jurisprudence to serve as judges, Twelver Shi'i judges had to come up from Lebanon to apply the law.[6] The Alawis, then, were spared subordination to Sunni courts by embracing the Twelver Shi'i school, but they were incapable of judging themselves according to its principles. Not a single Alawi had been to Najaf, to hear the lectures delivered in its academies by the recognized Twelver Shi'i jurisprudents of the day. Yet there were a few Alawi shaykhs who did delve in books of Twelver jurisprudence, and these were soon given formal appointments as judges in Alawi religious courts. It seems likely that what prevailed in these courts was a very rough notion of Twelver Shi'i jurisprudence, modified still further to accommodate Alawi custom.

In laying hand on the Twelver law books, the Alawi religious shaykhs had borrowed all that they cared to borrow from the Twelver tradition. These texts gave them a useful store of precedents for application in the narrow field of civil law. But in the weightier matter of theology, Alawi shaykhs clung to their own doctrine. They had no use for other branches of Twelver scholarship, and made no effort to put themselves in touch with Twelver Shi'i theologians and jurisprudents elsewhere. Once Alawi judges were installed in the Alawi religious courts, Lebanese Twelver judges ceased to frequent the Alawi region, and the Alawis were content to remain cut off from the body of Twelver Shi'ism. As a result, Lebanon's Twelver Shi'is were left completely in the dark about the beliefs of the Alawis. This emerges from an anecdote about a visit to Latakia in the 1930s by Lebanon's preeminent Twelver divine, Shaykh Abd al-Husayn Sharaf al-Din of Tyre. To his host, a leading Sunni notable and *sayyid* of Latakia, he said: "I have come first of all to visit you and then to ask about the doctrine of the Alawis among whom you live. I have heard it said that they are *ghulat*."[7] In this curious scene, a Twelver Shi'i inquired of a Sunni about the beliefs of an Alawi.

In fact, the Alawi shaykhs were no more prepared to bare their doctrines to Twelver Shi'is than to Sunnis. The Alawis had simply chosen to judge themselves, in their own courts, by the principles of Twelver Shi'i jurisprudence. The religious shaykhs had not decided to submit their beliefs to the scrutiny of Twelver Shi'is, or to recognize the authority of living Twelver divines.

Political separatism was compatible with Alawi religious esoterism, and it won many adherents among the Alawi religious shaykhs. But as the French mandate wore on, nationalist agitation for Syrian independence and unity caused the French to falter in their support of Alawi separatism. Without unqualified French support, separatism did not stand a chance of success. Cautious Alawis instead began to seek Sunni guarantees for the fullest possible Alawi autonomy and equality in a united Syrian state. The Sunnis, in turn, wished to integrate the Alawi territory in a united Syria with the least amount of Alawi resistance. These interests converged in 1936 as Syria approached independence. To smooth the integration, some thought that a Sunni authority should recognize the Alawis as true Muslims, an expedient recognition which would serve the political interests of Alawis and Sunnis alike. But in order for the recognition to have the desired effect, it would have to declare the Alawis to be believing and practicing Muslims.

The recognition came in July 1936, and took a reciprocal form. The Alawis themselves took two steps. First, a group of Alawi religious shaykhs (*rijal al-din*) issued a proclamation, affirming that the Alawis were Muslims, that they believed in the Muslim profession of faith, and performed the five basic obligations (*arkan*) of Islam. Any Alawi who denied that he was a Muslim could not claim membership in the body of Alawi believers. Second, an Alawi conference held at Qardaha and Jabla submitted a petition to the French Foreign Ministry, stressing that although the Alawis were partisans of Ali, "just as the Catholic, the Orthodox, and the Protestant are yet Christians, so the Alawi and Sunni are nevertheless Muslims."[8] At the same time, the Sunni mufti of Palestine, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, issued a legal opinion (*fatwa*) concerning the Alawis, in which he found them to be Muslims and called on all Muslims to work with them for mutual good, in a spirit of Islamic brotherhood.[9]

There obviously was more to this exchange than met the eye. The Alawi proclamation and petition did not renounce any of the esoteric beliefs attributed to the Alawis. Their very existence could not be divulged. It was widely believed that the Alawis kept some of their beliefs secret, and their own public elucidation of their doctrine could not be expected to have much effect. But Hajj Amin al-Husayni's *fatwa* was another matter since it issued from a prominent Sunni authority,

in his dual capacity as mufti of Palestine and president of the General Islamic Congress in Jerusalem. Yet the *fatwa* also was problematic. Why did a Sunni authority in Jerusalem, and not in Damascus, act to recognize the Alawis? After all, there were no Alawis in Palestine, and Hajj Amin had not made an independent investigation of their beliefs or rituals. Was he moved by a pure desire for ecumenical reconciliation? It seemed unlikely. For Hajj Amin had very close ties with those leaders of the pan-Arabist National Bloc who led the struggle for a united Syria. The pan-Arab nationalists in Damascus probably initiated the move, not Hajj Amin, who was simply their obliging cleric. They obviously turned to Jerusalem because they could not extract comparable recognition of their Alawis from Sunni religious authorities in their own city. These authorities apparently were not prepared to soil their reputations by declaring night to be day since they refused to regard the Alawis as Muslims. So when Syria's nationalists were pressed to provide Sunni recognition of the Alawis, they secured it from a dubious source. It would be accurate to say that in sealing this deal of recognition, both Alawis and Sunnis extended their left hands.

Excluded from all this were the Twelver Shi'is although there may have been an attempt to involve one of them as well: Shaykh Muhammad al-Husayn Al Kashif al-Ghita of Najaf. This ecumenical evangelist was keen to strike religious bargains with Christian, Sunni, and Druze, so long as these served the sublime political purposes of Arab unity. This was undoubtedly his motive in entering into correspondence with Shaykh Sulayman al-Ahmad of Qardaha. Shaykh Sulayman held an exalted position among the Alawis: He was the spiritual leader of the majoritarian Qamari section of Alawis and bore the formal title of "Servitor of the Prophet's Household" (*khadim ahl al-bayt*). A poet of reputation, he had been admitted to the Arab Academy in Damascus.[10] Yet he bore the responsibility of a master entrusted with all of the powerful esoteric teachings of the Alawi faith, and these he was bound to preserve from the prying divine from Najaf. Their correspondence was apparently never published and yielded no public gesture of recognition. Perhaps even Shaykh Muhammad al-Husayn realized that he had reached the limits of expediency.[11]

Certainly not a word of public comment on the standing of the Alawis was heard from Najaf or Qom, the great seats of Twelver Shi'i learning. An open endorsement of the Alawis by a leading Twelver Shi'i divine would have carried much more weight that the Alawis' own self-interested protestations, or the questionable *fatwa* from Jerusalem. But how could the leading lights in Najaf and Qom embrace the Alawis, when not one Alawi had attended their religious academies? When the works of

the medieval Twelver theologians, still read and revered in these academies, described the Alawis as *ghulat*? When the news from Syria brought word that an epileptic, illiterate shepherd named Sulayman al-Murshid had unleashed a wave of messianic expectations among many Alawis, who acclaimed him a *nabi*, a prophet? On the one hand, much influence might be gained by laying claim to this community for Twelver Shi'ism; on the other, much authority might be lost by endorsing people of questionable belief. Recognition of the Alawi claim was obviously a matter that required exacting study in Najaf and Qom.

In 1947, Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim, the leading Twelver Shi'i divine in Najaf, turned his attention to the Alawis. He wrote to Shaykh Habib Al Ibrahim, the Twelver mufti of the Lebanese Biqa, asking him to visit the Alawi region on his behalf, and to provide a first-hand report on their beliefs and ways. Shaykh Habib accepted the mission and traveled extensively among the Alawis, meeting with reformist shaykhs and offering religious guidance. The Lebanese emissary concluded that there was a clear need to send some intelligent young Alawis to Najaf, where they could engage in proper theological and legal studies under the masters. They would then return home radiant with knowledge to enlighten their brethren. Ayatollah Hakim agreed to bear the expense of this missionary effort, and twelve Alawi students left for Najaf in 1948.

In a short time, all but three of the students had dropped out. On their arrival in Najaf, they met with hostility from some of the Twelver Shi'i men of religion, who set conditions upon their acceptance as Muslims and even demanded that they submit to purifying ablutions. In Najaf, the Alawi students found that they were still called *ghulat*, even to their faces. Years later, Ayatollah Hakim expressed his regret at this treatment, saying that "it seems this was the result of some ignorant behavior by the turbanned ones." But no one intervened at the time. The young students, cast into strange surroundings, could not bear these humiliations for long, and most returned home.[12]

No one suggested for a moment that older Alawi religious shaykhs be sent to Najaf. Instead, Shaykh Habib proposed the establishment of a local society to promote the study of Twelver Shi'i theology and jurisprudence. In this manner, Alawi shaykhs could receive proper guidance in an organized framework. The Ja'fari Society, established in response to Shaykh Habib's proposal, had its headquarters in Latakia, and branches in Tartus, Jabla, and Banias. In addition to diffusing Twelver doctrine, the society undertook to construct mosques and lobbied for official recognition of the Twelver Shi'i school by independent Syria. For with Syrian independence, the separate Alawi religious courts had been abolished, and Alawis were made to appear before Muslim religious

courts that recognized only the Sunni schools. The recognition sought by the Ja'fari Society was finally extended in 1952. Thereafter, the Twelver school was deemed equal to other recognized schools of law, and its precepts could be applied by Muslim religious courts.[13] The Alawis, then, had won some formal recognition from the Syrian government. But they still had not received the endorsement of the Twelver Shi'i authorities of Najaf and Qom. In fact, all of the recommendations made by Ayatollah Hakim's Lebanese emissary assumed that the Alawis were deficient in their understanding of true religion and still needing much knowing guidance.

In 1956, another Twelver Shi'i emissary called upon the Alawis: Muhammad Rida Shams al-Din, a scholar at Najaf, and a member of one of South Lebanon's most respected clerical families. His trip was funded by Ayatollah Mohammad Husayn Borujerdi, the very highest Twelver Shi'i authority of the day, who had his seat at Qom and a large academy at Najaf. Ayatollah Borujerdi was very keen on Islamic ecumenism and invested much effort in pursuing a Sunni-Shi'i reconciliation. Leading the Alawis back to the fold seemed an obvious motif for still another kind of ecumenical initiative, and Borujerdi was willing to bear the expense of a second group of Alawi students, who would study at his academy in Najaf. The Lebanese emissary won an enthusiastic reception, and he immediately published a sympathetic account of the Alawis.[14] But nothing came of the plan to bring a second group of students to Najaf. Memory of the ill treatment meeted out to the first group was still fresh, but there may have been a more compelling reason. For in 1956, one of the remaining Alawi students from the first mission wrote a book about the Alawis, which was published in Najaf. While generally apologetic in tone, the book leveled some pointed criticisms at Alawi doctrine and the structure of Alawi religious authority. It was ignorance to deny the ignorance of Alawis in matters of religion, the student wrote. He denounced the "bloated army" of unschooled Alawi religious shaykhs, who inherited their status and lived off tithes exacted from believers whom they kept in the dark.[15] If these were the sorts of ideas that the brightest Alawi students were bound to bring back from Najaf, then an unwillingness among the Alawi shaykhs to organize a second student mission would be perfectly understandable. No more Alawi students reached Najaf until 1966, when three came to study under Ayatollah Hakim. One of them reported that his group did not encounter the same visceral hostility which enveloped their predecessors.[16] But by the late 1960s, Syria's ruling Ba'th party had entered upon a collision course with the rival Iraqi Ba'th party, and antagonism has generally plagued Syrian-Iraqi relations ever since. For Alawi students, Najaf was again beyond reach.

Several young Alawis preferred Cairo to Najaf anyway, and entered programs of religious studies at al-Azhar. In 1956, an Azhar shaykh appeared in Qardaha with offers of scholarships for ten Alawi students.[17] With the establishment of the Egyptian-Syrian union in 1958, Alawis came under even greater Sunni pressure, and were encouraged to get their religious training in Cairo. There is no way of knowing how many Alawi students passed through al-Azhar during those years and later, but they could not have been fewer than those who reached Najaf. Al-Azhar provided an education with an obvious Sunni bias and offered only rudimentary instruction in Twelver Shi'i jurisprudence. But, unlike the Najaf academies, al-Azhar granted regular diplomas which were recognized in Syria, and this made it a very attractive alternative.[18] So the handful of Alawi religious shaykhs with wider education were divided in their attachments between Najaf and Cairo, between Twelver Shi'ism and Sunnism. This was the ambiguous situation in 1966, when power in Syria was seized by Alawi hands.

The rise of Alawi officers to positions of influence and power put a sharp edge on the religious question. The new regime's radical economic and social policies stirred opposition, especially among urban Sunni artisans, petty traders, and religious functionaries. As the regime's base became more narrowly Alawi over time, opponents found it convenient to transfer the political debate to the highly emotive plane of religion. Those who did so argued that the regime's Arabism merely legitimized Alawi political hegemony; its socialism simply sanctioned the redistribution of Muslim wealth among the Alawis; and its secularism provided a pretext for stifling Muslim opposition. Fundamentalist opponents of the regime sought to draw the boundaries of political community in such a way as to exclude the Alawis and did so by relying upon their own exacting definition of Islamic orthodoxy. This situation was rich in irony. The Alawis, having been denied their own state by the Sunni nationalists, had taken all of Syria instead. Arabism, once a convenient device to reconcile minorities to Sunni rule, now was used to reconcile Sunnis to the rule of minorities. The cause of Sunni primacy, once served by having the Alawis recognized as Muslims, now demanded that the Alawis be vilified as unbelievers.

In February 1971, Hafiz al-Asad became the first Alawi president of Syria. Rising from a poor Qardaha family, he played an important role in dismantling the old order and seized power by crushing an Alawi rival. His elevation to the presidency marked a turning point. The significance of such an office in a regime such as Syria's is symbolic rather than substantive, but the presidency had always been held by Sunnis, and its passage to an Alawi proclaimed the end of Sunni primacy.

In January 1973, the government went still further and released the text of a new draft constitution. This document was also of symbolic significance, and was meant to legitimize the radical changes sought by the regime. Its message was emphatic: Unlike pre-Ba'te constitutions, this one did not affirm that Islam was the religion of state. This grievous sin of omission precipitated a crisis, as Sunni demonstrators poured out of the mosques and into the streets. General strikes closed down Hamah, Homs, and Aleppo. Asad, who was taken aback, proposed the insertion of an amendment in the constitution, stipulating that the president of the state shall be Muslim. But the situation actually deteriorated after Asad's offer: At issue was not the constitution, but Alawi hegemony. The violent unrest ended only with the entry of armoured units into the cities.[19]

In 1973 the Alawi religious shaykhs fell over one another in their rush to affirm that the Alawis were Muslims, that they were Twelver Shi'is through and through, and that other beliefs attributed to them were calumnies.[20] But these Alawi claims were in dire need of some external validation. Much had changed since 1936, and Sunni recognition would not do: The higher Sunni religious authorities in Syria had already knelt before Asad, and no one regarded them as capable of thinking or speaking independently on any issue. What was needed was some form of recognition from a Twelver Shi'i authority, who could buttress the Alawis' own problematic claim that they were Twelver Shi'is.

The solution appeared in the person of the Imam Musa al-Sadr. By 1973, this political divine had made much progress in his effort to stir Lebanon's Twelver Shi'is from their lethargy. His most impressive achievement had been the establishment of the Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council (SISC), authorized by a 1967 law that declared the Twelver Shi'is a legal community in the fullest sense. With the establishment of the SISC, a question arose as to whether the small Alawi community in Tripoli and the Akkar district did or did not come under its jurisdiction. Numbering about 20,000, these Alawis were closely tied to those of Syria, and belonged to the same tribes. Although they were not recognized by Lebanese law as a distinct community, they generally tended their own affairs. The Alawis in the north of Lebanon had no historical ties to the Twelver Shi'is in the south and east.

In 1969, Musa al-Sadr became chairman of the SISC and attempted to bring Lebanon's Alawis under his jurisdiction. A strong streak of ecumenism ran through Musa al-Sadr's highly politicized interpretation of Shi'ism. Even as he fought Sunni opinion over the recognition of Lebanon's Twelver Shi'is, he did not stop preaching the necessity for Muslim unity. The uncomplimentary references to the Alawis in the

Twelver sources would not have deterred him. He may also have been eager to extend his reach into the north of Lebanon: Inclusion of the Alawis, however few in number, would give him a constituency in a region where he had none.

But to bring Lebanon's Alawis under his wing, Musa al-Sadr first had to treat with the Alawi religious shaykhs in Syria. The dialogue began in 1969, and dragged on for four years. A statement by the SISC made only vague allusion to "difficult historical circumstances" and "internal disputes,"[21] but it was not hard to imagine what blocked an agreement. The Alawi religious shaykhs in Syria feared that their coreligionists in Lebanon might slip from their grasp, and they were also mindful that some Lebanese Alawis still hoped to secure official recognition of the Alawi community as separate and distinct from all others. The religious shaykhs probably never imagined that they would face a serious challenge issued by a Twelver Shi'i divine from Lebanon. They had chosen Twelver Shi'i law to guarantee their religious independence, not to diminish it. So they drew out the dialogue with Musa al-Sadr, withholding their assent.

Then came the Sunni violence of 1973 and the reiterated charge that the Alawis were not Muslims. The disturbances shook the Syrian Alawi elite, who then pressed the Alawi religious shaykhs to look differently at Musa al-Sadr's overtures. If Musa al-Sadr would throw his weight behind the argument that Alawis were Twelver Shi'is, this would undermine at least one pillar of the Sunni indictment of the regime. Since the Alawis of Lebanon did not differ in belief from those of Syria, their formal inclusion in the Twelver Shi'i community would constitute implicit recognition of all Alawis. For his part, Musa al-Sadr may have begun to realize that his recognition of the Alawis might bring political advantages which he had not previously imagined. The regime of Hafiz al-Asad needed quick religious legitimacy; the Shi'is of Lebanon, Musa al-Sadr had decided, needed a powerful patron. Interests busily converged from every direction.

The covenant was sealed in a Tripoli hotel in July 1973. In a public ceremony, Musa al-Sadr, in his capacity as chairman of the SISC, appointed a local Alawi to the position of Twelver mufti of Tripoli and northern Lebanon. Henceforth, Lebanon's Alawis were to come under the jurisdiction of an appointee of the SISC. A delegation of Alawi religious shaykhs from Syria witnessed the event, and Musa al-Sadr delivered a speech justifying the appointment. Lebanon's Alawis and Twelver Shi'is were partners since both had suffered from persecution and oppression. "Today, those Muslims called Alawis are brothers of those Shi'is called Mutawallis by the malicious." What of the internal unrest in Syria? "When we heard voices within and beyond Syria,

seeking to monopolize Islam, we had to act, to defend, to confront." Then Musa al-Sadr roamed still further afield: "We direct the appeal of this gathering to our brethren, the Alevis of Turkey. We recognize your Islam." The new mufti, Shaykh Ali Mansur, joined in the ecumenical oratory: "We announce to those prejudiced against us that we belong to the Imami, Ja'fari [Twelver] Shi'a, that our school is Ja'fari, and our religion is Islam." Nor did Musa al-Sadr lose the opportunity to call for an end to tension between Syria and Lebanon, which had resulted from a disagreement over the role of Palestinian organizations in Lebanon.[22]

The Alawi religious shaykhs in Syria had given the appointment their blessing. But this deal was done at the expense of another Alawi party: those Lebanese Alawis who wanted to preserve their separate identity, and perhaps win official recognition for their community. This opposition was championed by a group known as the Alawi Youth Movement. In a series of statements, the group maintained that the Alawis, while Twelver Shi'is, were a separate community and deserved separate status under the law. The SISC was attempting to assimilate the Alawis against their will.[23] Tension in the Alawi quarter of Tripoli grew as the day of the ceremony approached, and when it arrived, security forces set up roadblocks at entrances to the city and the affected quarter. Opponents of the mufti's appointment held a rally that evening, featuring the inevitable demonstration of shooting into the air and a call to the community to boycott the new mufti.[24] Tension ran high for weeks afterward, and, in one instance, partisans and opponents of the new mufti even exchanged gunfire.[25] This internal dispute forced Musa al-Sadr to tread carefully, and the SISC issued a clarification, explaining that the purpose of the mufti's appointment was not to absorb the Alawis, but to provide them with a service that they lacked.[26]

But regardless of what happened in Tripoli, Syria's Alawis could claim to have Musa al-Sadr's endorsement. Did it amount to much? Musa al-Sadr did have extensive ties in Qom, his place of birth, and Najaf, where he had studied. His father had been one of the great pillars of scholarship in Qom. So it is interesting to note by what higher authority Musa al-Sadr claimed to act in the matter of the Alawis. His initiative, he declared, was part of his ecumenical work on behalf of the Islamic Research Acacemy, a Nasserist appendage of al-Azhar.[27] This was one of those Sunni arenas in which Musa al-Sadr regularly appeared as part of his self-appointed ecumenical mission. Unlike other Lebanese Twelver emissaries to the Alawis, Musa al-Sadr did not represent a leading Twelver divine at Najaf or Qom. He acted solely in his official Lebanese capacity, with the sanction of an obscure academy in Cairo. For the embrace of 1973 was political, not theological. Syria's Alawis

certainly did not plan to submit to Twelver authority, and Musa al-Sadr's move did not diminish their religious independence by a whit. They simply surrendered the small Alawi community of Lebanon, as one would force a marriage of convenience upon a reluctant daughter. Musa al-Sadr took the vow, and Hafiz al-Asad provided the dowry. Without that Syrian support, Musa al-Sadr's movement might not have weathered the storm which soon descended upon Lebanon.[28]

Still, the influence of Musa al-Sadr did wane following the outbreak of civil war. The Syrian regime, then, did not rest content with his endorsement, but sought to cultivate still another Shi'i divine with an ambition as vaunting as Sadr's. This was Ayatollah Hasan al-Shirazi, a militant cleric from a leading Iranian-Iraqi family of religious scholars. In 1969, Shirazi's incendiary preaching in Karbala had led Iraqi security authorities to arrest and torture him. He fled or was expelled from Iraq in 1970 and soon found his way to Lebanon, where he had spent an earlier period of exile. There he began to gather a following, and like Sadr he received Lebanese citizenship by special dispensation in 1977.[29] A certain mystery enveloped Shirazi's affiliations, for he, too, seems to have enjoyed a friendship of convenience with Hafiz al-Asad. Asad must have recognized Shirazi's value as a possible card to play against both Iraq and Musa al-Sadr, should the need arise, while the exiled Shirazi desperately needed a patron.[30] It is not surprising, then, that Shirazi should also have made himself a champion of the Alawis, placing his coveted stamp of approval upon their qualifications as Twelver Shi'i Muslims. It was Shirazi's position, set forth as a preface to an Alawi polemical tract, that the beliefs of the Alawis conformed in every respect to those of their Twelver Shi'i brethren, a fact which he had ascertained through personal observation.[31] Shirazi's explicit endorsement, combined with Sadr's, constituted a forceful argument for Alawi claims. But the obvious political expediency of this move rendered it as suspect as any previous endorsement. Shirazi, after all, was in exile, and in sore need of Syrian support. If he were to build his influence in Lebanon with Syrian backing, could he do less than Sadr had done? It is idle to speculate how this alliance might have unfolded: In May 1980, Shirazi was shot to death in a Beirut taxi.

As to the actual doctrines expounded by the Alawi religious shaykhs, it is impossible to know whether they underwent any change as a result of these embraces. Perhaps the younger, educated shaykhs formulated some sort of Alawi reformism and made a closer study of Twelver theology and philosophy; perhaps their elders yielded on a few points of detail. But in an esoteric faith, doctrinal controversies are kept in a

closed circle of the initiated, and these held their tongues, except to assure their critics that they were Twelver Shi'is. Yet the question of religious doctrine was inseparable from that of religious authority, and here there was no change. Syria's Alawis did not recognize external authority, and they did not bind themselves as individuals to follow the rulings of the great living ayatollahs. On this crucial point, they differed from all other Twelver Shi'is, and as long as they refused to recognize such authority, they could not expect reciprocal recognition by any divine of the stature of Ayatollah Abol Qasem Khoi in Najaf, or Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari in Qom. It is worth noting that Ayatollah Shariatmadari, who had very broad ecumenical interests, did correspond with Shaykh Ahmad Kiftaru, Sunni grand mufti of Syria and faithful servant of the Syrian regime. Shaykh Ahmad even visited Qom during that tense summer of 1973, and one is tempted to speculate that he urged Shariatmadari to recognize the Alawis.[32] But Shariatmadari kept his silence, and made no gesture to Syria's Alawi religious shaykhs, who claimed so insistently to be his coreligionists.

In June 1977, Ali Shariati was laid to rest in Damascus, near the mausoleum of Zaynab. Regarded as something of an Iranian Fanon, Shariati offered a radical reinterpretation of Shi'ism and earned a devoted following and the scrutiny of SAVAK. When he died suddenly in London, his admirers charged foul play and arranged to have him buried in Damascus. The choice of Damascus as a place where Shariati's mourners might safely congregate was not fortuitous. After 1973, the Syrian authorities provided haven and support for numerous Iranians who were active in the religious opposition to the regime of the Shah. Musa al-Sadr, who officiated at Shariati's funeral, had much to do with encouraging these ties since he openly collaborated with the Iranian religious opposition. The Syrians, for their part, could not have imagined that this motley assortment of Iranian emigres and dissidents might ever come to power in Iran. But it was no trouble to keep them, and they did have links to some leading Twelver Shi'i clerics. If the endorsement of Ayatollah Shariatmadari could not be had, then perhaps that of Ayatollah Khomeini in Najaf might be secured. After all, Khomeini subordinated religious tradition to the demands of revolutionary action, and, like Musa al-Sadr, he needed influential friends. It is obviously impossible to know whether pursuit of such recognition for the Alawis played any role in the support given by the Syrian regime to the Iranian religious opposition. The Syrians may simply have wished to indulge Musa al-Sadr and defy the Shah. But Syrian support was steady, and in 1978, when Khomeini was forced out of Iraq and denied entry to Kuwait, he considered seeking refuge in Damascus before settling upon Paris.

The close relationship between Syria and the Islamic Republic of Iran was rooted in this early collaboration of convenience. A full account of Syrian-Iranian cooperation since 1979 would catalogue the stream of Iranian visitors to Damascus, including Khalkhali, Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Rafiqdust, and Khamenei, and would mention Syria's tolerance of a contingent of Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Syrian-controlled Lebanon. It would explain Iran's silence in the face of pleas by the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood for moral support in its struggle against the Syrian regime. And it would consider how Islamic Iran justified waging ideological warfare against a Ba'thist, Arab nationalist regime in Iraq, while aligning itself with a Ba'thist, Arab nationalist regime in Syria. Common hatreds and ambitions inspired this expedient alliance between two incongruous political orders. The Iraqi regime was hateful to both Iran and Syria. In Lebanon, Iran realized that it could not extend support to its clients there without Syrian cooperation; Syria knew that without Iran it could not control those Lebanese Shi'is who believed that they were waging sacred war against the West. A sense of shared fate, not shared faith, bound these two regimes together.

The Syrian relationship with Islamic Iran did enhance the religious legitimacy of Syria's rulers, but in a very subtle and indirect way. When these Twelver clerics—Khomeini's closest students and disciples—visited Damascus, they spoke only the language of politics. They did not utter any opinion on the beliefs, doctrines, or rituals of the Alawis, about which they knew no more than any other outsider. Instead, they spoke of political solidarity, appealing to all Muslims to set aside their religious differences, to unite to meet the threats of imperialism, colonialism, and Zionism. The Syrians, they argued, had made great sacrifices in the war against these evils. This particular commitment is the very essence of Islam in the minds of Iran's radical clerics, and they have not inquired further. To do so would only open a chasm between them and their self-proclaimed coreligionists.

But the Iranian revolution has increased the pressure for religious reform within the Alawi community. In August 1980, Asad reportedly met with Alawi communal leaders and religious shaykhs at Qardaha. Asad called upon the religious shaykhs to modernize and make reforms and to strengthen the tenuous links of the community with the main centers of Twelver Shi'ism. To this end, 200 Alawi students were to be sent to Qom, to specialize in Twelver Shi'i jurisprudence.[33] These Qardaha gatherings are not open affairs, and it is impossible to determine the accuracy of this account. But once the star of Twelver Shi'ism had risen in Iran and Lebanon, the regime had every reason to press the religious shaykhs to compromise and to do their share to deflate the Sunni argument against Alawi primacy.

The return of 200 Alawi graduates from the Qom academies would completely undermine the traditional structure of religious authority in the Alawi community. The old beliefs would wither; the new creed might not take root. These 200 students probably have not set out on their irrevocable course, for the consent of the religious shaykhs would not be given without long, procrastinating thought. But Hafiz al-Asad is waiting, and the guardians of Alawi faith may yet be made to sacrifice eternal truth to ephemeral power.

NOTES

1. On the general issue of sectarianism in modern Syria, see Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in Politics, 1961–1978* (London, 1979); Itamar Rabinovich, "Problems of Confessionalism in Syria," in Gustav Stein and Udo Steinbach, eds. *The Contemporary Middle East Scene* (Opladen, 1979), 128–32; Elizabeth Picard, "Y a-t-il un problème communautaire en Syrie?" *Maghreb-Machrek* (Jan.-Feb.-March 1980) no. 87: 7–21; and Gerard Michaud, "Caste, confession et societé en Syrie," *Peuples Méditerranéens* (July-Sept. 1981) no. 16: 119–30. On the Alawis in society and politics, see R. Strothmann, "Die Nusairi im heutigen Syrien," *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen* (1950) phil.-hist. Kl. Nr. 4: 29–64; Moshe Ma'oz, "Alawi Officers in Syrian Politics, 1966–1974," in H.Z. Schriffrin, ed. *The Military and State in Modern Asia* (Jerusalem, 1976), 277–97; Peter Gubser, "Minorities in Power: The Alawites of Syria," in R.D. McLaurin, ed. *The Political Role of Minority Groups in the Middle East* (New York, 1979), 17–48; Hanna Batatu, "Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance," *Middle East Journal* (Summer 1980) 35(3): 331–44; and Mahmud A. Faksh, "The Alawi Community of Syria: A New Dominant Political Force," *Middle Eastern Studies* (April 1984) 20(2): 133–53.

2. On Sunni opposition to Alawi primacy, see Hanna Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren," *MERIP Reports* (Nov.-Dec. 1982) 9(12): 12–20; Umar F. Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria* (Berkeley, 1983); and Thomas Mayer, "The Islamic Opposition in Syria, 1961-1982," *Orient* (Dec. 1983) 24(4): 589–609.

3. For the main features of Alawi religious doctrine, see René Dussaud, *Histoire et religion des Nosairis* (Paris, 1900); Louis Massignon, "Nusairi," *EI*[1] 3(2): 963–67; and Heinz Halm, *Die islamische Gnosis: die extreme Schia und die Alawiten* (Zurich, 1982), 284–355. For a compendium of hostile Twelver references to the Alawis, see the clandestine publication of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, *al-Nadhir*, Oct. 22, 1980.

4. On Ottoman-sponsored mosque construction for the Alawis, see Mahmud al-Salih, *al-Naba al-yaqin an al-alawiyyin* (Damascus, 1961), 134–37; and Strothmann, 51.

5. *Oriente Moderno* (1922) 1: 732; (1924) 4: 258–59.

6. On the appearance of Lebanese judges in the Alawi region, see Massignon, 966; and Jacques Weulersse, *Les pays des Alaouites* (Tours, 1940) 1: 261.

7. Ali Abd al-Aziz al-Alawi, *al-Alawiyyun* (Tripoli [Lebanon], 1972), 43.

8. Texts in Munir al-Sharif, *al-Muslimun al-alawiyyun* (2d ed.; Damascus, 1960), 106–8.

9. Full texts with translations in Paulo Boneschi, "Une fatwa du Grande Mufti de Jérusalem Muhammad Amin al-Husayni sur les Alawites," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* (July-Aug. 1940), 122(1): 42–54; (Sep.-Dec. 1940) 122(2–3): 134–52.

10. On Shaykh Sulayman, see *al-Irfan* (Sidon) (Nov. 1938) 28(6): 520–21, 648.

11. Although he may have yielded to temptation after all. According to the same Alawi source, Shaykh Sulayman managed to secure from Najaf a license (*ijaza*) as an interpreter of law (*mujtahid*) although he never set foot in the Shi'i shrine city; see al-Salih, 138. This could only have been at the instance of Shaykh Muhammad al-Husayn. But there is no corroboration for this report in other Alawi published sources.

12. On the first student mission, see al-Alawi, 38-41; Muhammad Rida Shams al-Din, *Ma'a al-alawiyyin fi Suriya* (Beirut, 1956), 48–50; and *al-Irfan* (Sidon) (March 1950) 37(3): 337–38.

13. On the Ja'fari Society, see Shams al-Din, 50–52; al-Alawi, 41–42; text of the official decrees recognizing school in al-Alawi, 47–49.

14. On Borujerdi's role, see Shams al-Din, 19, 43.

15. Ahmad Zaki Tuffahah, *Asl al-alawiyyin wa-aqidatuhum* (Najaf, 1957), 5, 52–53.

16. Al-Alawi, 41.

17. Shams al-Din, 36–37.

18. Among the Alawi Azhar graduates was Shaykh Yusuf al-Sarim, who became one of Latakia's leading religious shaykhs. Although his orientation was said to be strongly Sunni, he was assassinated by the Muslim Brotherhood in August 1979.

19. On the crisis of 1973, see John J. Donohue, "La nouvelle Constitution syrienne et ses détracteurs," *Travaux et jours* (April-June 1973) no. 47: 93–111; and Abbas Kelidar, "Religion and State in Syria," *Asian Affairs* (Feb. 1974) n.s. 5(1): 16–22.

20. See the resolutions of the Alawi religious shaykhs, and other statements, in pamphlets entitled *Al-alawiyyun, man hum wa-ma aqidatuhum* and *al-Alawiyyun, shi'at ahl al-bayt;* also *al-Hayat,* April 4, 1973.

21. Statement by Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council, *al-Hayat,* July 6, 1973.

22. *Al-Hayat, al-Nahar,* July 7, 1973; see also *Middle-East Intelligence Survey* (Aug. 15, 1973) 1(10): 77–78.

23. Statements by Alawi Youth Movement, *al-Nahar,* July 7, 1973; *al-Hayat,* July 20, 1973.

24. *Al-Nahar,* July 7, 1973.

25. *Al-Nahar,* July 18, 1973.

26. *Al-Nahar,* July 6, 1973.

27. Statement by Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council, *al-Nahar,* July 6, 1973; on the Academy, see J. Jomier, "Les congrès de l'Académie des Recherches Islamiques dépendant de l'Azhar," *Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Etudes Orientales du Caire* (1980) 14: 95–148.

28. It is interesting to note that the endorsement of the SISC was reaffirmed by Shaykh Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din after Musa al-Sadr's disappearance. According to Shams al-Din, "there are no religious sects within the Shi'i community. When we speak of Alawis or Isma'ilis, this signifies regional, historical denominations based on political allegiances and not religious differences. The

Ja'faris or Shi'is are absolutely indivisible, and they all share the same belief in the Twelve Imams." *Magazine* (Beirut), Dec. 15, 1979.

29. On Shirazi, see *Tariq al-thawra* (Tehran) (Rajab 1402) no. 25: 10–11; *Rah-e enqelab* (Tehran) (Jum. I-II 1403) no. 29: 25-29, where mention is made of his view of the Alawis as brethren of the Shi'a. I owe these references to Mr. Amatzia Bar'am.

30. On Shirazi's role in Lebanon and his Syrian ties, see *Arabia and the Gulf*, May 16, 1977.

31. *Al-Alawiyyun, Shi'at ahl al-bayt* (n.p., n.d.).

32. On the visit, see *al-Hadi* (Qom) (Aug. 1973) 2(4): 182–83.

33. According to Michaud, 122.